

SALSA WAR

It's not about the pine nuts.

Or the garlic, or the parmesan cheese, or whatever else is used to funk it up.

No, don't even think about using canola oil, avocado oil or anything else that may give you the slightest comfy feeling that you are truly, indeed, "eating healthy". It's nothing but high-quality, extra-virgin olive oil, and lots of it.

It's about the spinach. Pure and simple. Fresh picked, unwashed, rinsed, raw spinach. Preferably Tyee.

While we're at it, I don't want to hear about the Italians or the Greeks, or anything about the haughty LA restaurants that started serving pesto back in the days when everyone thought it was marijuana, granola and lemon juice run through a Waring blender. My great-grandmother made it with a mortar and pestle and called it spinach spread.

Granny got tired of the whole damn family turning up their noses at her hot, steaming bowls of boiled spinach, served with a cruet of vinegar. I was only a youngster but I would eat the asshole out of a skunk. And alas, even I, as young and stupid as I was, could not eat Granny's steamed, soggy spinach.

But she fooled me, as well as the rest of the family. She was good at that sort of thing.

"Come here, Petey Joe. I have some PJ Green Lightning, just for you!" Whereupon she would hand me a perfectly toasted slice of her legendary, homemade buttermilk bread, adroitly

buttered and anointed with a smooth, glistening glaze of ground and mashed Granny's Spinach Spread.

But I was an easy mark. Easy to please, eager to gobble up any of her tasty, homemade vittles.

Later, she got trickier. She started making her spinach spread with roasted acorns and eventually, Texas pecans. Hell, I would've eaten Green Lightning over a scoop of vanilla ice cream. But, as I told you, I was easy.

I'm not going to talk about the foofoo pestos, the modern, trendy stuff, basil and cilantro. Granny kept her basil protected with a shotgun, saving it for the bologneses and marinaros she reserved for special occasions. When the family got too rowdy, like after listening to a "Fibber McGee and Molly" episode on a scratchy radio, she would ice down a galvanized washtub of Jax beer and stew up a cauldron of her killer spaghetti sauce. She always snuck in a double handful of not-so-chopped basil just after it came to a simmer.

Cilantro? No, not for pesto. That was for venison neck machaca, carnitas and about any taco anyone still sober could come up with.

Pesto was spinach spread. Period.

No use trying to talk alpha-tocopherol or antioxidants to a youngster or to Granny. My great-grandmother came to Texas as a young bride in a covered wagon. And until the day she died, I really don't think she understood, or gave a shit, what a calorie was. She thought omega-3 and omega-6 were constellations.

It was, and is, about the spinach.

Jan stepped into her kitchen to see how her staff was doing. It was early in the day and her market sported a few patrons enjoying their specialty coffees, top-secret homemade breakfast entrées, and *pan dulces*. Today was Pesto Day, the first of the new growing season and Jan and her veteran homemakers-turned-chefs were busy filling standing orders of spinach pesto, chive pesto and chive blossom jam.

The early spring spinach was up and enough could be picked for the filling of her first orders.

Jan headed to the espresso machine and tapped herself a double. Instinctively, she slid her hand into the breast pocket of her Dickies overalls to that invisible pack of Camels.

There was nothing there. *Shit!* Nothing whatsoever. *I could sure use a smoke. Now, why did I quit?* She reconciled her needs. *Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whiter teeth and better breath. Fewer wrinkles. And oh yeah, my health.*

Jan seated herself so that she could visit with her patrons and keep an eye on the kitchen. She dragged a fulsome slurp of espresso from her hot mug then took off her palm-straw hat and shook her shaggy dishwater hair back and forth. Across the room, a man carefully removed his sport sunglasses, each secured ear loop at a time. He smiled and nodded a “Hi” to her.

Jan relaxed a bit and peered out through the back, double doors across her fields to the West. She saw herself in her tilled patches twenty years ago. She watched that young counterculture girl full of piss and vinegar running a razor-sharp hoe, murdering bindweed, spurge and pig weed. Back then she wore tight cut-offs and Vasque hiking boots. She even shaved her legs.

Her cell phone landed Jan back to the present. To her disgust the display read Sonny Caldwell. Steeling herself and letting the phone ring its computerized music, she finally answered in as formal and detached a voice as she possibly could, “Hello, this is Janice.”

“Hi Jannie, its Sonny,” spoke her ex-husband. Jan recognized the smooth, silky tone of Somerset Maugham Caldwell, Jr.

“Hi Sonny, what’s up?” she continued from a distance.

“I want to talk to you about Jake.”

“So, shoot.”

“I just got word that Jake has a gig this weekend. Is that right?” came the velvet voice of a hustler.

“I’m not sure I would call it a gig. He’s filling in as a replacement for a local group playing in Ridgway. It’s Friday and Saturday night.” Jan’s answers were ice.

“I heard it is a bar. Liquor, dancing.”

Even colder, Jan continued to measure out the information. “That is correct. He needs both a ride and a chaperone. He can’t drive yet and he’s a long way from twenty-one.”

“Is he singing?”

“Oh, Hell no!” Jan chuckled to herself. “He’s drumming. They have their own trap set.”

Boy, are you out of it!

“Are you going alone?” smooth Sonny asked as he slid the knife into her back.

“Sonny, what the fuck is this about? What do you want? I don’t have time to play ‘Twenty Questions’!” *Of course I’m going alone!*

“Relax. Nothing personal--”

“Personal? Nothing personal? It’s all personal!”

“Sorry, Jan. That came out wrong. I’m sorry. I just wanted to hear Jake play. I thought if you’re going to spend the evening with someone, Caitlin and I would join you. That’s all.”

Caitlin? Jan was boiling. *What a highbrow, snooty name. Snooty bitch to go with her snooty name.*

“No. This is for Jake, I’m just going to drive him up there, hang out, and bring him home.”

“Well, would you like some company? Caitlin and I would be--”

“Not a chance, Sonny. Anything else?”

“No. That’s it, thanks,” Sonny said, not nearly as slick and smooth as he started.

Jan calmed herself, reached for another cigarette that was not there, rose and marched to the back of her café. She stood at her double doors and peered out over her deck to the west.

Jan watched Dell. His earbuds solidly in place, he wielded his hoe as if he were dancing on a stage. His shoulder length hair, shielded by his Noggin Top, bounced about his neck as he stroked and hoed to an unshared rhythm. Shirtless and brown, trails of sweat drooled off his shoulders under the straps of his Carhardt overalls.

Her hired hand weeded her rows. *Jesus! How long has it been? How long has it been since anyone, a man, even, touched me?* She fought her thoughts, as well as her desires but the desires won. *What would it take for him to just throw me down? No commitments, no courtship. No flowers, maybe just a cold beer. No one would know, or would they? Oh shit! What about the kids?*

She couldn’t help herself. *I wonder what he feels like, what he tastes like?*

“Think he’d give me a mercy fuck?” whispered a voice to her side.

Jan wheeled around to find Susie standing an inch away from her with one hand on her cheek, the other hand holding up a spoon of fresh pesto. Susie's eyes were fixed at the end of the row of young tyee, watching Dell bob to his earbuds and slaughter weeds like he was dancing with Lady Gaga.

"Jesus, Susie!" Jan hissed, "what the hell?"

"Just one time. Just one good, hard fuck. Bet I'd scream like a cheerleader."

"Susie, are you and Bob having trouble?" asked an astonished Jan.

"Oh, no!" Susie said. "Being married to the same accountant for twenty years has its way of altering one's judgment." She turned to Jan and continued in a low, but heartfelt voice, "Don't tell me you haven't wished for the same thing."

"Okay. Okay, just stop," Jan said. "Yeah, I know it's been a long time and he is quite a hunk. Too bad he's so young." She returned her gaze to the rhythmic chopping of Dell's distant hoe.

"That's what would make it even better, young and strong, really strong," purred Susie following Jan's eyes out to Dell.

"Here," Susie said without taking her eyes off of Dell, "try this."

Susie held up a spoon with a dollop of fresh pesto like a grandfather holding up a stop sign at a grade school crossing.

Instinctively, Jan took the spoon and sucked the pesto off of it. Slower, way slower than she should have. Savoring it more, way more, than she should have.

"Umm. Now you've got it," she murmured back to Susie. "If you get lucky, I don't want to hear about it."

Jan pulled into the parking lot of the Honky Tonker, in Ridgway. Easing up next to the backdoor, she turned off her ignition. Turning to Jake she grabbed his wrist.

“Jake, I’m not kidding. No weed. Don’t even think about it. You want to have a beer, that’s okay. Backstage, so no one can see you. One beer. Just one. Don’t blow this.”

“Geez, Mom! I know, I know.”

Jan parked, took a peek at someone else in her rearview mirror, someone she hadn’t seen in quite a long time. Liking that new person smiling back at her, she reached for her purse. She slipped on her tinsel-town sunglasses and preened a bit more. *Not bad for a farmer. I’ll just walk in quietly, keep my shades on and no one will even notice. Just another chick looking for a night out. I could actually use a good, stiff drink myself.*

Jan slipped into the bar unnoticed. The juke box was already in full swing. So was the dance floor.

Her pimpled, red ostrich boots carried her past the bar, to the smallest table in the farthest corner of the room. Seated, Jan straightened her frilly leather vest that covered her mint, stylish Western top. Indulging herself in a ladylike head toss of her shaggy hair, she surveyed the room.

“What’ll ya have, Jan?” jolted her back to reality.

Surprised, Jan peered over the top of her giant sunglasses, directly at the waitress.

“Oh, hi, Carla.”

Gathering herself, Jan ordered, “Just bring something fizzy, maybe with a lime in it. Make it a virgin. I’m chaperoning tonight and I have to drive home, later.”

“Yeah, I heard. Boy, Jake is really sprouting up. Good-looking kid, looks just like --”

“Yeah!” Interrupted Jan, saving her old friend from embarrassing the both of them.

“Getting to be a handful, too.”

Placing her optical disguise into her purse, Jan settled in and relaxed.

The River Ranglers tinkered with their guitars and pretended to tune up. Two lead guitars, a base and electric fiddle warmed up the amps. The fill-in vocalist and harmonicist dialed in the electronics. The steel guitar player plucked gingerly at his strings while his slide glided back and forth over his frets.

Jan studied Jake as he splattered out a few riffs and tried several unsuccessful rim shots. She watched his young feet search desperately for the right pedals. Two bass drums, three foot clapping symbols run by two teenage feet. Jake was outnumbered.

Oh well. She sipped her virgin Tom Collins. *At least he’s not trying to sing.*

Thoughts of the River Ranglers and the ones she knew, bounced in her head. *Not a bad group of kids.* Thinking back twenty years brought more memories. *I’ve seen a lot worse, BEEN a lot worse!* Snapping back to reality, she quickly glanced around to make sure no one could hear her thoughts.

The River Ranglers were a bunch of twentysomething locals from neighboring communities. They all knew each other from high school athletics and fighting and playing softball and drinking beer and chasing each other’s girlfriends. Over the years they became teachers, farmers, elk hunting guides and truckers. Two of them were married and relatively sane. The others were still looking.

Jan knew how that felt.

Nine sharp arrived, as Carla stepped on to the tiny stage took the microphone and introduced, "... a collection of local misfits!! The River Ranglers! Let's hear it for the Ranglers!!"

The lead guitar blew Carla off the stage with the opening bars of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama." The River Ranglers knew how to get their drinkers and dancers off their asses and stompin'.

It was going to be a good night.

Nervous, and excited, Jan drained her drink as the first set came to a close. She grabbed her purse and proceeded to the ladies room.

Returning to her maternal command station, she noticed her glass had been removed. Jake was nowhere to be seen.

Just before the second set, Jake reappeared. Grinning from ear to ear, he held up his right index finger. From across the dance hall he winked at his proud but worried mother.

Shit! Jan was beside herself. *He looks like his father but he takes after me. Shit!*

Before she finished beating herself up, Carla appeared with another wussy Tom Collins and a giant tray of steaming Honky Tonker Red Mountain Secret Magic Nachos.

"Not me, Carla, must be another table", Jan explained.

"Nope, it's you. Complements of Tex!"

"Tex? Oh, bullshit. And I'm Dolly Parton." She noticed two setups on the tray along with two glasses of ice water with wedges of lemon. "Anything else, Jan?"

Stunned, she was silent, for one of the few times in her life.

The steel guitar shattered her confusion. Her view of the stage was blocked by a worldly smile in a stylish flannel shirt, standing in front of her table.

Holding a margarita, he said over the frantic picking, “Good evening, may I join you?”

Trying to clear the sparklers from her head, Jan could only look up and stare.

“I’m hungry,” he said.

“Tex?”

“Name’s Travis, everyone calls me Tex.”

“Sorry. Sure. Of course. Sit down, please. You just surprised me a little.”

Tex dragged a chair around the table, up next to hers, a bit too close. Politely he asked, “If you don’t mind, I would like to watch the band.”

“No problem, I’m watching him, I mean them, too.” Jan regained her wits.

Without looking at her, Tex leaned over and spoke into Jan’s ear above the frantic picking and fiddling. His upper lip flicked her pinna, ever so slightly and she shivered. “Your boy is a good-looking kid. Takes after his Mama.”

Jan never moved, was not about to take her eyes off the band, not even for a compliment from a total stranger. Regardless of the hot, spicy streak shooting down her back to that dimple above her cheeks, she was determined to remain steady, as well as aloof. She had goosebumps popping everywhere. *Thank God he can’t see my arms.*

Looking at him, studying him, something clicked. The electric fiddle started up before she could say it. She leaned over, this time into HIS ear and said, “I know you. I’ve seen you before.”

“Of course you have. I stop in your place all the time.” He laughed out loud and looked into her puzzlement.

“Oh, my God. Zeiss sunglasses! Double espresso, just like me. Rhubarb pie, with a single dip of vanilla. You like my pies.” She was smitten.

“Yep,” he said, “and I like you as well.”

More flaming streaks, deeper. This time down her back through the cheeks of her firm bottom, under and up around to the front. Her goosebumps had goosebumps.

Relaxed, they chatted between songs and listened to the music. The second set drew to its close and the River Rangers closed it out with bawdy, brawling version of “The More I Drink” It was a cranked up, throbbing, rock version of Blake Shelton’s mocking admonition.

The shouts and the applause was deafening.

“Told you his name was Tex!” beamed Carla as she stood before the two of them. “Still working on those nachos? More drinks?”

“I’ll have another margarita and the lady will have another soda”, came a polite order.

“No! Make it two margaritas!” breathed a sultry Jan.

Tex smiled at her, an open, honest smile. He nodded his approval to Carla.

“Good evening Jannie!” A greasy, smooth voice came out of her past. “Just got here. How’s he doing?”

Glad you could make it, you giant prick! Jan stared at the man before her. Saying nothing, she looked for something on the table to throw at him. *Your son’s first performance with a real band. What an ass. Wonder where Cuntlin, er, Caitlin is?*

“Don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.” Sonny stuck out his hand to Tex. “Sonny Caldwell.”

Tex rose slowly, eyes fixed on Sonny and offered back a confident, gentlemanly shake.

Jan could not help herself. She watched Tex rise slowly, like a slow-motion piston moving to “top dead center”, looking for ignition then combustion.

He was an inch taller than Sonny and just as attractive. His curly brown hair countered Sonny's Adonis blonde mane but his shoulders and back gave Jan chills. Under his untucked, flannel shirt was a banded waist supported by two oaken tree trunks.

He looked like a maul, suitable for splitting logs.

"Travis. The pleasure is mine, Sir," His voice was a gravelly rasp, of a voice straight out of West Texas. "Would you care to join us?" He looked to be one of the faces on a bluff at Mount Rushmore.

"No, thank you, kind of you to ask. Caitlin and I just got here and we snagged a little table up front. We'd like to dance. Kick up our heels a bit, if you know what I mean?" He chuckled rudely.

Jan knew exactly what that meant and it pissed her off. *Yeah! Heals Up! Over his shoulders, that is, on her fancy-shmancy bed in Telluride. Rich, cougar bitch!*

"No problem, Sonny. Nice to meet you." Tex ended dismissively.

Jan looked away disgusted and said nothing.

"You didn't have to pinch me," he said. "He wasn't going to join us. Doesn't have the nuts." Turning to look at her, he said, "I'm sorry, Jan. I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't be! He's an asshole."

The Ranglers blasted off the third set with a jarring electric rift from the Black Crowes and began belting "Hard to Handle" a tune written for technical drumming and boogie-woogie dancing.

Tex muttered under his breath, "Lets see what you got, Sticks. Show 'em the way!"

Jan and Tex enjoyed the third set. She watched Tex get into it, into the music. His eyes were fixed on Jake and she studied his smiles, his smirks and his frowns. Jan analyzed his

pulsing upper torso, his fingers tapping the table and his gaze flitting down as he occasionally shook his head.

Mentally, Tex corrected the mistakes, ‘No, no, YES, NO!’

Between songs, Jan grabbed Tex’s hand and asked, “What did you play?”

“Linebacker.” He answered without taking his eyes off of the stage.

“No! You’re a musician, aren’t you?”

“Among other things.” He turned and looked at her in the way she hoped he would.

The set, and the evening, ended with a sensual, crooning rendition of “Walkin’ After Midnight”, first sung by the immortal Patsy Cline.

The lights came on, dancing couples smooched syrupy kisses and grabbed each other’s butts. Everyone else fondled their last drink, as well as their partner. Tex looked at Jan, this hard-ass, hard working, hard drinking single mother and spoke matter-of-factly.

“It’s only Friday.”

“And?”

“Will he play tomorrow night, as well?” It was a simple question, he expected more than a simple answer.

“Yes.”

“May I escort you here tomorrow? May I pick you and Jake up and bring you here tomorrow? I’m asking you for a date.”

“Is this about me, or my kid?”

“What do you think?” replied a cool, calm Tex.

As driven and hardened as she was, Jan, for one of the few times in her not-so-young life, held her acid tongue. She was silent. Finally, she replied, “Yes. That would be nice. I would like that. It would be fun.”

She listened to herself from a distance, as if she were the third person at the table. Her own words reverberated in that vacant chamber that had become her heart. Out of her own body, she heard herself. Her echo was something nice, something soft. Hopeful and sweet.

This was new for her and she liked it.

It had been a while.